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Cuba:
Promoting Armed Struggle
in South America

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Information available as of 1 September 1981 has been used in the preparation of this report.

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This assessment was prepared by
Cuba/Caribbean Analytical Center, Office of Political Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Latin America Division, OPA

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The assessment was coordinated with the Office of Strategic Research, the Office of Economic Research, the Directorate of Operations, and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America.

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Cuba: Promoting Armed Struggle in South America

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Key Judgments

Since the overthrow of President Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979, armed struggle has played an increasing role in Cuba's policy toward Latin America. A trend—which shows no sign of abating—has been established toward greater risk-taking and growing dependence on violent revolution as a mainstay of foreign policy.

Cuba's hard line has Soviet blessing. The Soviets have come to acknowledge that under certain circumstances rebel groups can serve as the revolutionary vanguard more effectively than can the local Communist party.

The keystone of Cuba's policy is the development of a strong paramilitary force in target countries like Colombia to provide muscle for revolutionary movements regardless of the path to power they choose. In countries where the electoral route is closed, such as Chile, a paramilitary force is needed to carry out guerrilla warfare.

Even if revolutionaries can gain power through elections, the Cuban leadership believes force will still be required to consolidate victory and to defend against the inevitable counterrevolution—a lesson learned from the Allende experience in Chile.

In countries where prospects for revolutionary change are dim, Castro probably believes that a rise in terrorism will provoke enough government repression to lead to mass alienation, one of the factors necessary for revolutionary success. Havana is willing to train guerrillas even from Argentina and Uruguay, where there is little chance of overthrowing the government, in part because the trained insurgents constitute reserves that can fight elsewhere in fulfillment of their "international duty"—as they did in Nicaragua in 1979.

As long as Castro and his ex-guerrilla comrades remain the policymaking elite in Cuba, Havana's foreign policy will prize armed struggle. To these activists, violent revolution is a political philosophy deeply rooted in their personal experience. They are convinced that the systems that govern most countries today cannot meet the needs of the masses and therefore must be replaced.

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The Castro regime may revise its tactics as a result of setbacks, but its commitment to violent revolution will not change. Any falloff in its support for Latin American revolutionaries would require events similar to those of the late 1960s—a series of major guerrilla defeats, Cuba's virtual isolation in the hemisphere, and strong pressure from the USSR.

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Return to Subversion

During most of the 1970s Havana's support for revolutionary movements in Latin America was at a low ebb:

- No Cubans were known to have operated with any insurgent group from 1971 to 1978.
- Cuba evidently did not supply any rebel group with arms or ammunition from 1974 to late 1978.
- Before 1978, only a few Cuban-trained guerrillas left the island to return to their native countries.

At a conference of the hemisphere's Communist parties in Havana in 1975—the first such gathering since 1964—Cuban leaders proclaimed that the vanguard role in the Latin American revolutionary struggle would be played by orthodox Communist parties instead of the leftist revolutionaries Havana had been backing. In a virtual capitulation to the Soviet view, Cuba even agreed to withhold support from any group not endorsed by the pro-Soviet Communist party of the country concerned. These concessions in effect prevented those groups espousing violence as the route to power from receiving Cuban help. By early 1977 Cuban support of Latin American revolutionaries had reached its lowest point.

The impetus for a reappraisal of Havana's revolutionary strategy originated in late 1978 as the Sandinista threat to the Somoza regime became significant. At the same time, hardliners gained influence in the Cuban leadership, strengthening the regime's inclination to increase support to revolutionary movements throughout Latin America.[1]

By the summer of 1980 Castro had become heavily involved in promoting an "insurrectionist line." On 26 July he gave his most forceful public endorsement of the need for armed struggle in almost a decade. Havana again had become actively engaged in the

There will be no coups d'etat in Nicaragua because the people have the power. The people have the arms. What happened in Chile cannot happen here. It cannot happen. What happened in Bolivia will not happen here. It cannot happen. . . . The experiences of Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, and Bolivia teach us that there is no other way than the revolution, that there is no formula other than the revolutionary armed struggle, which is the thesis Cuba has defended.

Fidel Castro
26 July 1980

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development of strong revolutionary vanguard movements in the hemisphere. Central America clearly was to receive the greatest emphasis, but a major effort also was aimed at several South American nations.

Revising Revolutionary Theory. Somoza's defeat in Nicaragua had an immediate effect on Cuban and Soviet revolutionary doctrine. The new approach began to emerge in March 1980 following a three-day regional "theoretical conference" in Havana. Unlike the meeting in 1975, representatives of insurgent groups from several countries—including El Salvador, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Chile—participated along with the orthodox Communist parties.

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At the same time, Soviet academicians writing in the March 1980 issue of *Latinskaya Amerika*—the journal of the Institute for Latin America of the USSR Academy of Sciences—suggested that paramilitary groups in Latin America, such as the Sandinistas and Castro's own 26 July Movement, could sometimes assume the role of the revolutionary vanguard more effectively than the orthodox Communist parties.

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In a clear demonstration of Moscow's acceptance of the doctrine of armed struggle, the Nicaraguan Communists were publicly criticized in a *Latinskaya Amerika* article for not cooperating with the Sandinistas. The article cautioned Latin American Communist parties against claiming to possess a monopoly on the truth and against pinning sectarian labels such as "adventurists" and "extremists" on leftist groups working for forceful change.

Moscow has been careful, however, not to exclude the orthodox Communist parties from a role in this revolutionary process. It has continued to express confidence that in the aftermath of a revolution in which old political, social, and economic institutions are destroyed, the Communist party eventually will gain control despite greater contributions made by other elements of the revolutionary front.

Increasing Sophistication. Support for the doctrine of armed struggle did not mean an unconditional return to Cuba's simplistic approach of the 1960s, when the insertion of a guerrilla team in the field was considered all that was needed to spark a revolutionary upheaval. Three themes central to the conference in 1975 continued to receive strong emphasis—unification of the left, creation of broad international support, and development of links to the masses—but these were now components of an overall strategy of armed insurrection.

The Cubans and the Soviets constantly tout the Sandinista example as evidence of the critical role played by leftist unity and international support in achieving and retaining power. They view these as requisites for legitimizing the revolution and safeguarding it against counterrevolution and outside interference. Although leftist forces also must strengthen their paramilitary capabilities and try to exploit legitimate paths to power until those paths prove fruitless, unity is seen as the linchpin.

If the unified left succeeds through elections, as Salvador Allende did in Chile in 1970, the possession of a strong paramilitary capability protects the leftist leadership and provides insurance against the armed forces which, in Cuba's view, are irreversibly opposed to revolutionary change. The Cubans faulted Allende for not developing a paramilitary force strong enough to prevent the coup that unseated him in 1973, and they are determined to make sure that other revolutionaries who achieve power through elections do not make the same mistake

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On the other hand, if the left does not succeed by legitimate means, it can claim that the only way to right social ills is violent revolution, thus providing theoretical justification for armed struggle. A strong paramilitary capability is therefore required regardless of the success or failure of the electoral effort, and the earlier it is created, the sooner the left will be prepared to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

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Supporting South American Revolutionaries

Havana's enthusiasm about developments in Central America quickly grew to include South America. South American revolutionaries and other leftists visiting Havana in early 1979 received much the same advice as their Central American counterparts.

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Following the theoretical conference in March 1980, the pace of Havana's activities accelerated. The Castro regime increased its efforts to promote leftist unity, especially in Colombia and Ecuador, and began pressing other groups to move from political strategy to armed struggle. For instance, the Cuban Communist Party invited Chilean leftists to Havana in June 1980, after which leaders of three Chilean guerrilla factions announced the formation of a broad front to coordinate armed struggle. Following another meeting in Havana in December, exiled leaders of a faction of the Chilean Socialist Party and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left issued a joint statement pledging unity and declaring armed rebellion the only feasible way to overthrow the Pinochet regime.

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Bohemia ©

Fidel Castro surrounded by leaders of the Nicaraguan Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) at 26 July 1979 celebrations in Cuba

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Reflecting the level of Havana's interest, Fidel Castro became personally involved in some of these efforts.

Havana's tactical advice was accompanied by a sharp increase in direct support to South American insurgents, particularly those from Chile, Colombia, and to a lesser extent Argentina. In the last case, Havana focused its efforts primarily on activities outside Argentina. For example, Cuba employed a number of Montoneros in the so-called "Internationalist Brigade" that fought alongside the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979. The Cuban media, meantime, provided favorable coverage of all such exploits.

The Colombian Model. The recent Cuban-supported subversive effort in Colombia appears to be a textbook example of Cuba's approach to much of Latin America in the coming decade.[2] It seems clear that Havana readily risked a rupture in relations to undermine Colombia's Government and institutions through a combination of armed struggle and legitimate political activity

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Cuba had maintained contact for years with the Colombian M-19, an urban terrorist group headed by Jaime Bateman. It was not until after the M-19's seizure of the Embassy of the Dominican Republic in Bogota in late February 1980, however, that the Castro regime began to view the group as having significant revolutionary potential and offered major support

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Another factor contributing to the Cuban decision to act as a catalyst in Colombia almost certainly was Castro's indignation over the role Bogota played in blocking Havana from a seat on the United Nations Security Council in late 1979. Moreover, as we judge from the Cuban Communist Party newspaper, Castro has never forgiven President Turbay for his hostility to Cuba prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion, when Turbay served as Foreign Minister.

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By October some 200 guerrilla trainees had begun to arrive in Cuba via Panama. Havana's willingness to accept such a large number of trainees suggests a

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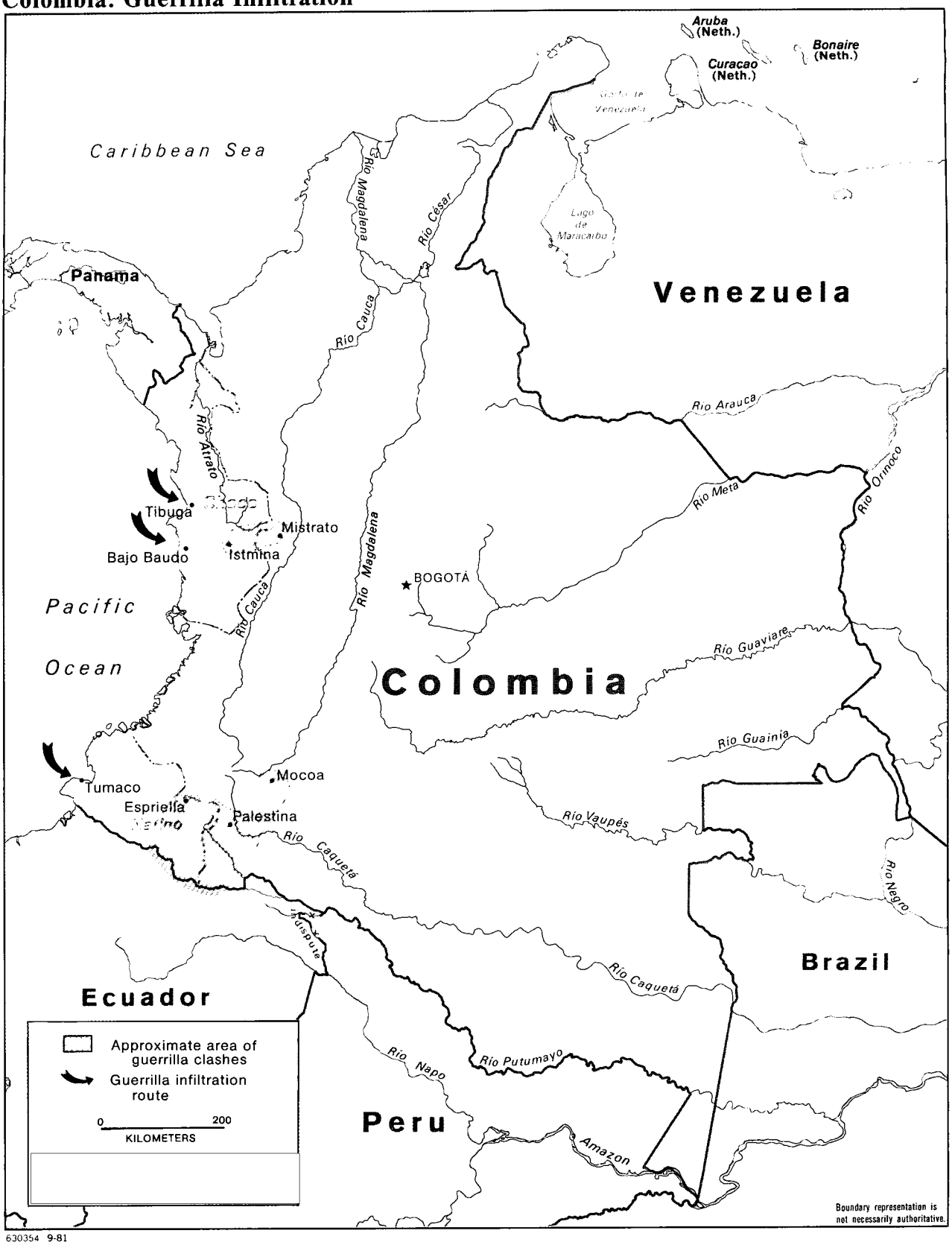
Colombia: Guerrilla Infiltration



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considerable degree of coordination as well as agreement on a guerrilla strategy for Colombia.

A Long-Range Goal. It is unlikely that the Cubans, with more than two decades of experience in guerrilla operations, would have involved themselves so deeply with such a poorly trained, inexperienced group unless they expected a payoff over the long term. The short duration of the group's training suggest that its immediate mission was not to undertake antigovernment operations but to gain practical experience in survival in a region where pressure from counterinsurgency forces was believed to be minimal.

Havana almost certainly considered the return of the nascent guerrilla force to Colombia as the first stage in a long-term process that would weed out the weak and uncommitted while creating a rural paramilitary force to complement the M-19's effective urban apparatus. The Cubans may have looked upon the M-19's urban and rural elements as essential underpinning for Bateman's participation in the electoral process, but the guerrilla fiasco this spring almost certainly ruled out the prospect that Colombian authorities would allow Bateman or any other guerrilla leader to run for office.

There also were signs that Havana had urged another Colombian guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army, to establish a political party to supplement its armed struggle efforts. In addition, one year ago, Cuba's military journal interviewed the head of the Colombian Communist Party and headlined his optimistic comments regarding the left's chances in pursuing the electoral route through the formation of a *Frente Amplio*.

In retrospect, Cuba's involvement in the M-19 affair indicates that Havana was not trying to take advantage of transient opportunities or institutional flaws it might have perceived in Colombia. Rather, it was following the same broad strategy it has outlined for other leftist groups: unification of the left, enhancement of the left's paramilitary capability, and exploitation of the legitimate paths to power until these paths prove fruitless.

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Outlook

The degree of Cuban involvement in a country's revolutionary process at any given time will be determined by a variety of factors ranging from Cuba's economic self-interest to Castro's whim. In the Colombian case Castro's distaste for the Turbay administration was a major factor behind Cuban support to the insurgents, while Havana's ideological animosity toward the government in Argentina has been tempered by its need for Argentine credits. Also pertinent is Moscow's desire to improve relations with Argentina. The Soviet connection has more significance now than in the past when Cuban adventurism caused serious strains in relations with the USSR. The Castro regime's current approach to exporting revolution raises fewer problems with its mentor because Havana takes Soviet goals and interests more into consideration in formulating policy. In addition, the Cubans have made a genuine effort to reduce friction with the various Communist parties of the hemisphere and to include them in its plans and activities.

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This has resulted in increased confidence in Moscow that the Cubans will not act in a manner that will embarrass the Soviets or endanger their priorities. Cuba has been so convincing in its cooperation that Moscow has given its formal blessing to the Cuban revision of revolutionary theory on the composition of the vanguard in the violent stage of the revolutionary process. With Soviet and Cuban policy toward Latin America so well synchronized, there is little chance of Havana deliberately embarking on an adventure that would knowingly provoke Moscow

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If, however, the Soviets anticipated that Cuban actions would provoke strong countermeasures by the US, Moscow's desire to exploit advantages probably would be replaced by a greater interest in avoiding major reversals to its interests in the area, particularly its heavy investment in Cuba. In such a situation Castro probably would be receptive to Soviet urgings that he avoid a confrontation with Washington.

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Increased US nonmilitary pressures also would give Castro some pause, but would not by themselves force him to abandon his long-term revolutionary goals or forgo probing for new opportunities. He responded to US warnings on El Salvador, for example, by apparently reducing his aid to the Salvadoran insurgents, but at the same time he was sponsoring the return of the M-19 guerrillas to Colombia. Under most circumstances—short of impending direct US military action—Castro will probably continue, and even expand, his support of regional revolutionaries. In his logic, such support is an effective weapon to divert US attention. Over the longer term, he believes this approach will produce additional revolutionary allies in the region to help undercut US influence and power.

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Castro is not so single-minded, however, as to pursue a course he believes holds little or no chance of producing benefits. A string of crippling guerrilla setbacks in Latin America would cause him to question whether continuation of heavy Cuban support was warranted. If a series of such defeats were combined with other major reversals, such as a return to Cuba's isolation in the hemisphere and the appearance of friction between Havana and Moscow over the issue of armed struggle, the Cuban leader would be likely—as he did in the early 1970s—to return to a more pragmatic policy.

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In sum, Castro will continue to promote, and perhaps escalate, revolutionary activity throughout Latin America—albeit less recklessly than in the 1960s. Havana sees prospects for a successful revolution as brightest in Central America and therefore will concentrate its efforts in that region. Nevertheless, the Cubans also will continue to support insurgent groups in South America. The Cuban leader sees promising opportunities through promotion of insurgency to advance Cuban objectives in the region and to restore a sense of revolutionary momentum at home in a period when little else seems to be working to his regime's advantage.

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